

# Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA)

*Konstantinos Rizos on the myths and misunderstandings surrounding Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA).*

In order to write this article, I first reached out to my staff, then to some of my learners, then to my learners' parents and eventually to my wider community. I wanted to identify the most common criticisms of Applied Behavioural Analysis. I was impressed to see statements I hadn't encountered before in my twenty years working in the field.

I hope that this article sheds some light on a science that has assisted many learners and their families across the world for the past five decades.

## 1. "ABA is therapy."

ABA is not a therapy, neither a treatment nor an intervention. ABA is a science based approach, and as such, it has an array of strategies that are implemented to support the individuals who are recipients of its methodology and tools. What is more, it is evidence-based and will only use evidence-based strategies to help achieve selected outcomes and improve the quality of life for the learner.

## 2. "ABA is for autistic people only".

ABA is considered to be a framework and system of practice and support for autistic people (according to the American Psychological Association). However, it also has applications in a wide variety of other areas such as brain injury rehabilitation, mainstream education, clinical behavioural analysis, behavioural sport psychology, behavioural gerontology, behavioural paediatrics – to name just a few.

## 3. "ABA always uses food as a reward."

This is an understandable misconception. Although ABA practitioners may employ edibles to teach certain prerequisites that will support the acquisition of a skill, those edibles are eventually faded, and other putative reinforcers are then conditioned (paired) that are selected based on being age-appropriate, respectful and contingent on preferences, drives and personal interests of the learners.

## 4. "ABA is like training a pet."

Although many of the principles of ABA may be used to train animals, and although many ground-breaking discoveries have occurred through animal research, the process of utilising ABA to develop skills in humans is quite different compared to animal training. Those differences relate to the concept, practice, goal setting, and more. In fact, the difference is as fundamental as the difference between animal and human learning; therefore, it is a faulty comparison.

## 5. "ABA relies on punishment."

ABA does not rely on punishment. The word punishment has understandably extreme negative connotations in lay language, bringing to mind reprimands, abuse and threats, it does not have the same meaning in ABA terminology. Quite simply, in behavioural science, the process of any stimulus you add or remove to decrease behaviour is called 'punishment' (corrective feedback is a better term). That being said, it is sadly but undeniably true that in the distant past, aversive procedures have been used by certain influential ABA researchers. However, the field has moved away from those practices and now uses positive reinforcement. Modern ABA programs are contingent primarily on praise and preferred items/activities. As a matter of fact, the importance of reinforcement rather than 'punishment' when developing methodologies is aptly highlighted in the Code of Ethics of the Behaviour Analysis Certification Board.

## 6. "ABA is teaching learners things below their actual abilities."

On the contrary, ABA sets high expectations in matters of learning. Specifically, for a behaviour analyst to call a skill mastered, they would expect to see their students perform it at a natural pace, across new environments, people and situations, and remember it for an extended period of time. That is why it uses a bottom-up approach by breaking down complex skills to train them in a logical sequence to ensure success and create independent learners.

## 7. "ABA is more well suited for young and earlier/intermediate learners than advanced learners. My child is able academically, so how does it fit them?"

Actually, ABA has an established history of many innovative contributions to mainstream education, and its impact has been well documented. Behavioural analysts were the first to discuss the importance of evidence-based practices in mainstream education. The most celebrated phonics education software is based on behavioural principles. ABA can be for everybody. However, multidisciplinary, evidence-based approaches should always be recommended.

*"ABA is not a therapy, treatment or intervention"*

*"Society is getting better at embracing diversity"*

## 8. "The sound of a 'behavioural plan' is concerning, and people were sent to my home to inquire specifically about this".

A behaviour plan is a treatment package. Positive behaviour support plans – integral to PBS practice, a form of ABA – have changed people's lives. Those plans should eventually be faded because successfully withdrawing treatments is key to best practice. This type of planning is standard practice fully accepted by the NHS. Behaviour support plans are not unique to ABA services, but ABA can definitely take credit for refining them.

## 9. "ABA tries to eliminate stimming and therefore removes self-soothing behaviour."

Absolutely not. Perhaps looking at reducing it, depending on its impact on the individual's and others' lives. Certainly not eliminating it, as long as they're not harming themselves or another person. These behaviours are calming to autistic people, and behaviour analysts appreciate the regulatory mechanism behind stimming.

## 10. "ABA is trying to make autistic children fit a neurotypical mould, based on what neurotypical individuals see as 'right' or 'socially acceptable' behaviour."

Thankfully we live in a day and age where society is getting increasingly better at understanding, accepting, respecting and embracing diversity. As is the case with many sciences, ABA historically has unfortunately not taken full consideration of ableism, intersectionality and neurodiversity. However, as a science, it progresses and constantly aims to improve. An increasing number of presentations, publications, reviews and talks now focus on how to provide services whilst considering neurodiversity. ABA is a science of social validity. People have been speaking, and behaviour analysts have been listening. We are not promoting masking of behaviours. And autistic behaviour analysts will agree.

## 11. "If you are a BCBA or RBT, then you are someone's abuser. ABA is abuse."

A bad practitioner of science does not make science automatically bad. The abuse of a system does not make the system abusive. Bad practice is not unique to ABA and can (and unfortunately does) happen across many fields. That is why behaviour analysts have such robust ethical guidelines. The profession is currently not protected in the UK, leaving a severe gap in regulation. Although this will hopefully change

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soon, it poses a continuous threat to the public presentation of the methodology whilst making consumers even more vulnerable to the dangers of malpractice.

## 12. "ABA teaches total compliance to adults, which puts children in danger. ABA stops them from making choices, and they're just robots."

Actually, teaching people to make choices is one of the most crucial aspects of an ABA-based programme/curriculum. ABA practitioners will never teach total compliance because this is not socially valid, but more importantly, it is indeed extremely dangerous. ABA will teach tolerance to waiting, tolerance to accepting no, tolerance to accepting the termination of a preferred activity when other tasks need to follow. But it will also teach people how to say 'no' to other people, how to express their own emotions, read other people's emotions and how to advocate for themselves.

It is a fact that ABA has received some heavy criticism over the years. Although all concerns need to be heard and addressed, it is constructive feedback rather than negative criticism that helps a field to self-reflect and then move onward and upward. [SEN](https://www.sen.org.uk)

If you want to gain more information on ABA in the UK, you can visit the UK Society for Behaviour Analysis website. <https://uk-sba.org/>